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(54) Flowering regulating gene and its use

(57) Flowering regulating genes of plants and methods for controlling plant flowering are provided. The flowering time can be modified in comparison with wild type plants by enhancing or inhibiting the expression of the flowering regulating gene. Transgenic plants in which the expression of the flowering regulating gene is regulated is also provided.

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Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to genes for floral regulation of plants and to methods for controlling plant flowering by regulating the expression of said gene. The present invention also relates to transgenic plants whose flowering time is modified in comparison with wild type plants by regulating the expression of said gene and to methods for generating said transgenic plants.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] In order to resolve the worldwide food problem, developing technology for increasing the yield of food using biotechnology has been desired. Grain, which is one of main crops, is seed of plants and some vegetables are fruits of plants. For productivity increase of these plants, floral regulation for controlling growth of plants is an important key technology. On the other hand, flowering inhibition of vegetables, whose vegetative organs such as leaves or roots are marketed, prevents vegetative organs from stopping their growth and often increases their productivity. In addition, for many crops the suitable cultivating places are limited because of their species specificity of hereditary flowering behavior depending on environment. Modification of these properties by flowering regulation can expand the suitable cultivating places.

[0003] In molecular genetic studies using model plants such as *Arabidopsis thaliana* and *Antirrhinum majas*, many genes involved in identity determination of floral meristems or morphogenesis of floral organs have been isolated. Among these genes LEAFY and APETALA-1 genes are known to be forcedly expressed in the host plant *Arabidopsis* or poplar when introduced into these plants, thereby flowering the plants earlier. since these genes are not fundamentally involved in floral budding (the transition from vegetative growth to reproductive growth), the use of these genes alone cannot arbitrarily regulate flowering. If the function of these genes is inhibited, the shape of inflorescence is changed, which is obvious from the phenotype of the mutants, and flowering cannot be regulated.

[0004] The embryonic flower mutant of *Arabidopsis*, in which flowering occurs immediately after germination, is known (Sung et al. (1992), Science, vol.258: p1645-). In this mutant, the function of a gene that maintains vegetative growth for a certain period of time after germination is thought to be lost. The flowering of wild-type *Arabidopsis* is thought to be inhibited by the expression of this gene. Although the approximate location of this gene on the chromosome is reported (Yang et al. (1995), Dev. Biol., vol.169: p421-), the result is far from helping the isolation of the gene and the gene has not yet been isolated.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] An objective of the present invention is to isolate a gene for floral regulation (flowering regulating gene) and to provide a transgenic plant into which the gene is introduced. If a fundamental gene that regulates flowering is isolated, flowering time can be freely controlled by artificially regulating this gene.

[0006] The present inventors have succeeded in isolating mutant *Arabidopsis* that exhibits flowering immediately after germination because the function of the flowering regulating gene is lost and in identifying a single gene, which was mutated, in a wide region of the chromosome and isolating it. Furthermore, the present inventors have confirmed that this gene has flowering inhibiting function by introducing the gene into *Arabidopsis* and expressing it. Based on these findings, the present inventors have completed the present invention.

[0007] Moreover, the present inventors have discovered that the flowering regulating gene isolated from any kind of plant by hybridization or PCR technique based on the sequence of *Arabidopsis* flowering regulating gene has the function that complements the mutation of the *Arabidopsis* super early flowering mutant, inhibits flowering, and induces normal differentiation of stems and leaves.

[0008] Thus, the present invention relates to novel flowering regulating genes that exist extensively in plants, proteins with flowering regulating activity encoded by said genes, transgenic plants in which the expression of said gene is modified, methods for generating these plants, and methods for controlling the flowering time of plants by regulating the expression of said genes. More specifically, the present invention relates to

(1) a DNA encoding a protein having flowering regulating activity, wherein said DNA selected from the group consisting of:

i) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1:
ii) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence substantially identical to that of SEQ ID NO: 1:
iii) a DNA hybridizing a DNA encoding the protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:1:

iv) a DNA encoding a protein comprising amino acid sequences showing 50% or more and 60% or more homology with amino acids 278 to 348 and 465 to 607, respectively, of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1;
v) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8.
vi) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence substantially identical to that of SEQ ID NO: 8.
vii) a DNA hybridizing a DNA encoding the protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8; and
viii) a DNA encoding a protein comprising amino acid sequences showing 50 % or more and 60 % or more homology with amino acids 282 to 352 and 450 to 592, respectively, of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8.a DNA encoding a protein having flowering regulating activity, wherein said protein comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1;

(2) the DNA of (1), wherein said DNA of i)comprises the coding region of the nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 2;
(3) the DNA of (1), wherein said DNA of v) comprises the coding region of the nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 9;
(4) the DNA of any one of (1) to (3), encoding a protein having a zinc finger structure;
(5) a protein having flowering regulating activity, encoded by the DNA of any one of (1) to (4);
(6) the protein of (5), comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1 or 8;
(7) a recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule comprising an expression cassette comprising the DNA of any one of (1) to (4);
(8) a recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule comprising an expression cassette comprising the following constituent elements of i) to iii),

i) a promoter that can transcribe in plant cells,
ii) the DNA of any one of (1) to (4) or a part of it fused to said promoter in sense or antisense direction, and selectively, and
iii) a signal involved in transcription termination of RNA molecules and polyadenylation, wherein the signal functions in plants:

(9) a transformant into which the recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule of (7) is introduced ;
(10) a transgenic plant cell into which the recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule of (8) is introduced:
(11) a method for producing a protein of (5) or (6), wherein the method comprises

(a) cultivating a transformant of (9) and
(b) recovering a recombinant protein from said transformant or the culture supernatant of it;

(12) a transgenic plant comprising transgenic plant cells of (10):
(13) a method for producing a transgenic plant of (12), wherein said method comprises

(a) introducing the recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule of (8) into plant cells and
(b) regenerating said plant cells;

(14) a DNA encoding an antisense RNA complementary to a transcription product of a DNA of any one of (1) to (4);
(15) a method for regulating the flowering time of a plant, wherein said method comprises introducing the whole or a part of a DNA of any one of (1) to (4) or the whole or a part of a DNA of (14) into a plant and expressing it, thereby changing the activity of a flowering regulating protein: and
(16) an antibody that binds to a protein of (5) or (6).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Figure 1 shows the location of the DNA clones of the chromosome region containing *Arabidopsis* "MPCI" gene and the markers 16EB53 and z11-1. In the figure the unfilled arrow shows the position and direction of "MPC1" gene and 11K22, 22K2, 19A20, and 20I12 show DNA clones.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0010] "An expression cassette" used herein means a DNA molecule comprising a gene and constituent elements essential for the expression of the gene. Typically, it is a DNA molecule comprising (i) a promoter to express a structural gene in a host, (ii) the structural gene, and, if necessary, (iii) aterminator. The promoter varies depending on the host.

For example, in order to produce a recombinant protein in a microorganism, a promoter functioning in the microorganism is used. For generating a transgenic plant, a promoter functioning in plant cells is used. An example of "a recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule comprising an expression cassette" is typically a vector comprising an expression cassette.

[0011] The present invention provides novel proteins regulating the flowering of plants and DNAs encoding said proteins. The nucleotide sequences of the cDNA and the genomic DNA of Arabidopsis-derived "MPC1", which has been isolated by the present inventors, are shown in SEQ ID NO: 2 and 3, respectively. The amino acid sequence of *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" protein encoded by the cDNA or genomic DNA is shown in SEQ ID NO: 1. The nucleotide sequences of the cDNA and the genomic DNA of rice-derived "Os-MPC1", which has been isolated by the present inventors, are shown in SEQ ID NO: 9 and 10, respectively. The amino acid sequence of rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein encoded by the cDNA or genomic DNA is shown in SEQ ID NO: 8.

[0012] The mutation of *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" gene eliminates normal flowering regulating ability of plants and leads plant to flowering immediately after germination (super early flowering mutation). The present inventors have found that guanine is substituted with adenine at the nucleotide 5039 of "MPC1" genomic DNA (SEQ ID NO: 3) in "mpc1" mutant plants (Example 1). Since the C-terminal amino acid residues from 541 of "MPC1" protein are not translated by this base substitution, the deletion of the amino acid sequence after this mutation point is thought to diminish the normal flowering regulating function of "MPC1" protein. In other words, this deletion inhibits flowering function and leads plants to super early flowering. This phenomenon has been induced by introducing and expressing an antisense DNA in plants, thereby inhibiting "MPC1" protein expression (Example 2). Furthermore, the cDNA of rice-derived "Os-NPC1", which shows significant homology with said *Arabidopsis* cDNA, also complement the super early flowering mutation of *Arabidopsis* (Example 5). It is therefore thought that these proteins exist widely in plants and regulate the flowering time.

[0013] Many plants including *Arabidopsis* vegetatively grow for a certain period of time after germination, flower, and reproductively grow. The genes of the present invention are essential to maintain vegetative growth, and to regulate the transition from vegetative growth to reproductive growth. In other words, the expression level of this gene regulates flowering. Therefore, the flowering time of plants can be changed by artificially regulating the expression of the genes of the present invention, which leads to productivity increase of useful plants.

[0014] DNAs used in this invention are not limited to DNAs encoding *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein mentioned above. Other DNAs encoding proteins functionally equivalent to these proteins can also be used.

[0015] An example of these DNAs is a DNA encoding a protein having an amino acid sequence substantially identical to that of *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1 protein, whose amino acid sequence is shown in SEQ ID NO: 1 or 8. "An amino acid sequence substantially identical" used herein means a sequence in which changes such as deletion, substitution, addition, and/or insertion have occurred at one or more amino acid residues of the control amino acid sequence, and an amino acid sequence constitutes a protein having flowering regulating activity as the protein comprising the control amino acid sequence. Changes such as deletion, substitution, and addition can be performed at several amino acid residues, for example, by site-directed mutagenesis (Kunkel et al. (1985), Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA, vol.82: p488-). Mutations of amino acids can also occur spontaneously.

[0016] Comparing amino acid sequences of proteins having flowering regulating activity of *Arabidopsis* and rice, high homology is found particularly in the region comprising zinc finger motifs and the region comprising an acidic amino acid cluster at the C-terminus. A zinc finger or zinc finger structure is a structure in which a part of a protein folds chelating zinc (Zn) to construct a protruding structure like a finger, and is thought to play an important role when the protein binds to a nucleic acid or other protein (Roosenfeld et al. (1993), J. Biomol. Struct. Dyn., Vol.11: p557-). An amino acid sequence that can form a zinc finger structure is called a zinc finger motif, several types of which are known. Zinc fingers of Cys2-His2 (C2H2) type are found at the amino acids 306 to 327 of the Arabidopsis-derived "MPC1" protein and the amino acids 310 to 331 of rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein. These motifs can be identified by, for example, a program such as "MOTIF" of "GenomeNet" (http://www.genome.ad.jp/), which is provided by Institute for Chemical Research, Kyoto University through the internet.

[0017] Acidic amino acid clusters are found in some kinds of transcription regulating proteins and sometimes play an important role in activating transcription (T. Tamura (1995), Mechanism of Transcriptional Regulation, Experimental Medicine Bioscience, Yodosha). These acidic amino acid clusters are found at amino acids 503 to 520 of *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" protein and amino acids 488 to 505 of rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein. These regions comprising a zinc finger motif or acidic amino acid cluster are likely to play an important role in flowering regulation of plants, and it is expected that high homology is kept in these regions of flowering regulation related proteins derived from plants other than *Arabidopsis* and rice.

[0018] The proteins having amino acid sequences substantially identical to that of Arabidopsis-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein shown in SEQ ID NO: 1 or 8 are preferably those comprising amino acid sequences substantially identical to the regions of the above sequences comprising a zinc finger motif and a C-terminal acidic

amino acid cluster.

[0019] A specific example thereof is a protein having flowering regulating activity, wherein the protein comprises amino acid sequences showing 50% or more and 60% or more homology with amino acids 278 to 348 and 465 to 607, respectively, of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1 (*Arabidopsis*), or a protein having flowering regulating activity, wherein the protein comprises amino acid sequences showing 50% or more and 60% or more homology with amino acids 282 to 352 and 450 to 592, respectively, of that of SEQ ID NO: 8 (rice).

[0020] Whether a protein has flowering regulating activity or not can be evaluated by, for example, introducing a DNA encoding said protein into super early flowering mutant plants. For example, a DNA encoding a test protein are introduced into super early flowering mutant plants such as "mpc1" *Arabidopsis* mutant, and expressed. The introduced DNA is judged to encode a protein having flowering regulating activity if it complements super early flowering mutant and differentiates normal stems and leaves as shown in Example 5. These DNA are thought to encode proteins having the same function as Arabidopsis-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein (SEQ ID NO: 1 or 8, respectively).

[0021] In addition, other DNAs encoding proteins functionally equivalent to *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein can be screened by hybridization technique using the whole or a part of the DNA sequence encoding the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1 or 8 as a probe (Southern (1975), J. Mol. Biol., vol.98: p503-; Sambrook et al. (1989), Molecular Cloning, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press). Partial sequences of "MPC1" or "Os-MPC1" used as probes are at least fourteen or more nucleotide sequences. For example, GeneImage system (Amersham) can be used for hybridization. In accordance with the protocol attached to the product, test DNAs are incubated overnight with labeled probes, and those that hybridizes with the probes can be screened by washing at 50 °C with 6xSSC and 0.1% SDS. Alternatively, DNAs encoding proteins functionally equivalent to *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein can be isolated from other plants by PCR technique using oligonucleotides specifically hybridizing with the DNA encoding the amino acid sequence constituting "MPC1" or "Os-MPC1" protein as primers (K. Shimamoto & T. Sasaki (1995), Protocols of PCR Experiments for Plants, Cell Engineering SUPPLEMENT, Plant Cell Engineering Series 2, Shujunsha).

[0022] Flowering regulating proteins encoded by DNAs obtained by such hybridization or PCR technique are thought to have high homology with *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein. The term "high homology" means 45% or more, preferably 60% or more, more preferably 75% or more, still more preferably 90% or more, and most preferably 95% or more homology with at least one amino acid sequence of these proteins. The homology may possibly become 45% or less when plural amino acid residues of the amino acid sequence encoded by the isolated DNA are deleted, added, or replaced. Even in this case, the DNA can encode a protein having the region essential for the function of flowering regulating proteins and having the equivalent flowering regulating activity. As mentioned above, it is important for the protein to exhibit the flowering regulating function- that high homology exists, in particular, in regions comprising a zinc finger motif region and a C-terminal acidic amino acid cluster region.

[0023] The homology between two or more genes in terms of the nucleotide sequences or the amino acid sequences of the proteins encoded by the genes can be determined using software for gene analysis, for example, DNASIS (Hitachi Software Engineering). In the software, the programs "Homology Plot," which plots homology as two-dimensional image, and "Maximum Matching," in which sequences are aligned considering gaps. are available for calculating homology between two genes (Needleman, S. B. et al. (1970), J. Mol. Biol., vol.48: p443-). The "Multialignment" program aligns three or more kinds of sequences to clarify the homologous regions (Waterman, M. S. (1986), Nucleic Acids Research, vol.14: 9095-).

[0024] Examples of plants fromwhich the DNAs of the present invention are isolated by hybridization or PCR technique include corn, wheat, barley, rye, potato, tobacco, sugar beet, sugarcane, rape seed, soybean, sunflower, cotton, orange, grape, peach, pear, apple, Japanese apricot, tomato, Chinese cabbage, cabbage, Japanese radish, carrot, pumpkin, cucumber, melon, parsley, orchid, chrysanthemum, lily, saffron, pine, eucalyptus, acacia, poplar, Japanese cedar, Japanese cypress, bamboo, and yew, in addition to *Arabidopsis* and rice. but are not limited thereto. The present inventors have succeeded in isolating a flowering regulating gene encoding a protein substantially the same as *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" or rice-derived "Os-MPC1" protein from sugar beet using hybridization or PCR technique mentioned above (Example 6).

[0025] Flowering regulating proteins of the present invention can be produced as recombinant proteins or natural proteins. Recombinant proteins can be expressed with, for example. the expression system using *E. coli* as a host, as fusion proteins to glutathione S-transferase (Smith, D. B. et al. (1988), Gene vol.67: p32-) or as fusion proteins with histidine-tag (Nakamura et al. (1998), Protocols of Protein Experiments for Plants, Cell Engineering SUPPLEMENT, Plant Cell Engineering Series 9, Shujunsha). The desired protein expressed as a fusion protein in *E. coli* is isloated by purifying the fusion protein by affinity chromatography with glutathione or metal ions as ligands and cutting out the desired protein by an appropriate protease treatment. Natural proteins can be produced by known methods for preparing proteins from plants (Nakamura et al. (1998), Protocols of Protein Experiments for Plants, Cell Engineering SUPPLEMENT, Plant Cell Engineering Series 9, Shujunsha).

[0026] Using recombinant or natural flowering regulating proteins prepared by the method mentioned above, poly-

clonal or monoclonal antibodies against them can be generated (Nakamura et al. (1998), Protocols of Protein Experiments for Plants, Cell Engineering SUPPLEMENT, Plant Cell Engineering Series 9, Shujunsha). Polyclonal antibodies can be generated by, for example, the method below. A laboratory animal such as a mouse is immunized with the prepared protein or its partial fragments mixed with appropriate adjuvant by intraperitoneal or subcutaneous injection. Additional immunization is then performed 2 to 10 times every one to four week, preferably every one or two week. After the fourth week, the blood is collected, serum is obtained to serve as antibody, and the antibody titer is measured by, for example, western blotting. The obtained antibody can be used in various experiments.

[0027] Monoclonal antibodies can be produced by fusing myeloma cells and the spleen cells obtained from the laboratory animal such as a mouse immunized by the method mentioned above and cloning the hybridoma producing the desired antibody. The hybridoma is cultivated in an appropriate medium to obtain the desired monoclonal antibody from the culture supernatant. A large amount of antibody can be obtained when hybridoma is cultivated in ascites. For example, hybridoma is transplanted into a nude mouse and allowed to grow. The monoclonal antibody produced in ascites of said animal is then collected.

[0028] Plant flowering regulation of the present invention can be performed by enhancing or inhibiting the expression of DNAs encoding the flowering regulating proteins mentioned above in target plants. Specifically, transgenic plants are generated by introducing said DNA or the antisense DNA against said DNA to the target plant. The DNA or the antisense DNA can be placed under the control of an appropriate inducible promoter to subtly regulate the degree of activation or inhibition of flowering and flowering time.

[0029] These DNAs can be expressed by introducing, into plant cells, a recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule comprising an expression cassette comprising (i) a promoter that is transcribed in plant cells, (ii) the whole or a part of the DNA encoding a flowering regulating protein of the present invention fused at the downstream of the promoter in sense or antisense direction, and if necessary, (iii) a terminator sequence fused at the downstream of the DNA, which comprises a polyadenylation site essential for stabilizing the transcript. "A part of the DNA encoding a flowering regulating protein" used herein means a part of the DNA encoding a complete flowering regulating protein that regulates flowering when it is expressed in plant cells. The present invention includes these recombinant double-stranded DNA molecules. The recombinant double-stranded DNA molecules can have DNA sequences essential to transfer the molecule to host plant cells or to maintain it in the host cells at its 5'- and/or 3'-end as well as constituent elements described above.

[0030] An expression cassette can comprise a promoter to express constitutively or inducibly the DNA encoding the inserted flowering regulating protein of the present invention. Examples of promoters for constitutive expression are 35 S promoter of cauliflower mosaic virus (Odell et al. (1985), Nature, vol.313: p810-) and rice actin promoter (Zhang et al. (1991), Plant Cell, vol.3: p1155-). Examples of promoters for inducible expression are promoters known to express by external factors such as infection or invasion of fungi, bacteria, or virus, low or high temperature, dryness, irradiation of ultraviolet rays, contacting with specific compounds. Examples of these promoters are rice chitinase gene promoter (Xu et al. (1996), Plant Mol. Biol., vol.30: p387-) and tobacco PR protein gene promoter (Ohshima et al. (1990), Plant Cell, vo12: p95-), both of which are induced by infection or invasion of fungi, bacteria, or virus, rice "lip19" gene promoter that is induced by low temperature (Aguan et al. (1993), Mol. Gen. Genet., vol.240: p1-), *Arabidopsis* "HSP18.2" gene promoter that is induced by high temperature (Yoshida et al. (1995), Appl. Microbiol. Biotechnol., vol.44(3-4): p466-), rice "rab" gene promoter that is induced by dryness (Yamaguchi-Shinozaki et al. (1990), Plant Mol. Biol., vol.14(1): p29-), parsley chalcone synthase gene promoter that is induced by ultraviolet rays (Schulze-Lefert et al. (1989), EMBO J., vol.8: p651-), and corn alcohol dehydrogenase gene promoter that is induced under anaerobic conditions (Walker et al. (1987), Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA vol.84: p6624-). Besides, rice chitinase gene promoter and tobacco PR protein gene promoter are induced by specific compound such as salicylic acid, and rice "rab" gene promoter by sprinkling of a plant hormone abscisic acid.

[0031] Various cloning vectors comprising the replication origin of *E. coli* and a marker gene for screening transformed bacterial cells are available to introduce the recombinant DNA molecules into plants. Examples of these vectors include pBR322, pUC series, and M13mp series. A desired sequence can be introduced into a vector at an appropriate restriction enzyme site. A plasmid DNA obtained can be characterized by restriction endonuclease cleavage site analysis, gel electrophoresis, and other biochemical-molecular biological methods. Once the plasmid DNA is prepared, it can be cleaved and ligated with another DNA. The sequence of the plasmid DNA can be cloned into the same plasmid or other plasmids.

[0032] When the whole of a DNA encoding a flowering regulating protein of the present invention, for example, the whole region of Arabidopsis-derived "MPC1" cDNA, shown in SEQ ID NO: 2, is ligated at the downstream of a promoter in sense direction, expression of the flowering regulating gene can be expressed constitutively or inducibly depending on the property of the promoter used. Then, the activity of the flowering regulating protein in plant cells constitutively or inducibly increases, and consequently, delay or inhibition of flowering can constitutively or inducibly is caused in plants.

[0033] When the whole or a part of a DNA encoding a flowering regulating protein, for example, the whole or a part

region of *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" cDNA, shown in SEQ ID NO: 2, is ligated at the downstream of a promoter mentioned above in antisense direction, the antisense RNA complementary to the transcript of "MPC1" cDNA can be constitutively or inducibly expressed depending on the property of the promoter used. The expression of a flowering regulating protein of the present invention is constitutively or inducibly inhibited in plant cells, and consequently, flowering can be enhanced constitutively or inducibly in plants. Antisense DNAs used do not have to encode the antisense RNAs completely complementary to the transcript of endogenous flowering regulating protein gene as long as it can inhibit the expression of endogenous flowering regulating protein.

[0034] In plants, when a gene is ligated in sense direction at the downstream of a promoter causing constitutive and strong expression, the expression of both of the gene introduced and the corresponding endogenous gene is sometimes inhibited (Montgomery (1998), Trends Genet., 14, 255-). This phenomenon is called co-suppression. When a flowering regulating gene of the present invention, for example, the whole region of *Arabidopsis*-derived "MPC1" cDNA, shown in SEQ ID NO: 2, is ligated in sense direction at the downstream of 35 S promoter, the expression of the endogenous flowering regulating protein in plant cells can be inhibited by co-suppression to enhance flowering in plants.

[0035] Moreover, when a part of a DNA encoding a flowering regulating protein of the present invention, for example, a part region of "MPC1" cDNA, shown in SEQ ID NO: 2, is ligated at the downstream of a promoter mentioned above in sense direction, an incomplete flowering regulating protein can be constitutively or inducibly expressed depending on the property of the promoter used. The incomplete flowering regulating protein that constitutively or inducibly accumulates in cells can inhibit the normal function of the flowering regulating protein, thereby enhancing flowering constitutively or inducibly in plants.

[0036] Both dicotyledon and monocotyledon can be used as target plants for generating plants whose flowering behavior is changed in comparison with wild type plants. Particularly important plants are grain (for example, rye, wheat, corn, barley, and rice), fruits (for example, orange, grope, peach, pear, apple, and Japanese apricot), vegetables (for example, tomato, Chinese cabbage, cabbage, Japanese radish, carrot, pumpkin, potato, cucumber, melon, and parsley), ornamental plants (for example, orchid, chrysanthemum, lily, and saffron), other industrial crops of economical importance (for example, tobacco, sugar beet, rape seed, soybean, sunflower, and cotton), and trees that require a long period till flowering (for example, eucalyptus, acacia, and poplar, which are used as wood pulp, and cedar, Japanese cypress, pine, bamboo, and yew, which are used as lumber).

[0037] Various methods can be used for introducing expression cassettes into plant host cells. Examples thereof are transformation of plant cells with T-DNA using *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* or *Agrobacterium rhizogenes* as a transformation mediator, direct introduction into protoplast (infection method, electroporation method, etc.), and particle gun method, but are not limited thereto.

[0038] Direct introduction into protoplast needs no special vectors. For example, simple plasmids such as pUC derivatives can be used. Some methods for introducing a desired gene into plant cells need other DNA sequences. For example, when a Ti or Ri plasmid is used to transform plant cells, at least right side sequence or usually both side sequences at the T-DNA region of Ti or Ri plasmid should be connected adjacent to a gene to be introduced.

[0039] When *Agrobacterium* is used to transform plant cells, an expression cassette to be introduced should be cloned in a special plasmid, an intermediate vector or binary vector. An intermediate vector is not replicated in *Agrobacterium*. An intermediate vector is transferred into *Agrobacterium* with a helper plasmid or by electroporation. Having regions homologous to T-DNA sequence, an intermediate vector is integrated into Ti or Ri plasmid of *Agrobacterium* by homologous recombination. *Agrobacterium* used as a host has to comprise vir region. Usually, Ti or Ri plasmid comprises vir region and can transfer T-DNA into plant cells by its function.

[0040] In contrast, since a binary vector can be replicated and maintained in *Agrobacterium*, if it is introduced into *Agrobacterium* with a helper plasmid or by electroporation, T-DNA on a binary vector can be transferred into plant cells by the function of vir region of the host. The present invention also includes intermediate vectors or binary vectors thus obtained, and microorganisms such as *E. coli* or *Agrobacterium* comprising them.

[0041] Transformed plant cells can be regenerated to a plant. The method for regeneration depends on the kind of the plant cells. Examples thereof are the methods of Fujimura et al. (Fujimura et al. (1995), Plant Tissue Culture Lett., vol.2: p74-) for rice, Shillito et al. (Shillito et al. (1989), Bio/Technology, vol.7: p581-) for corn, Visser et al. (Visser et al. (1989), Theor. Appl. Genet., vol.78: p594-) for potato, and Akama et al. (Akama et al. (1992), Plant Cell Rep., vol. 12: p7-) for *Arabidopsis*. In plants generated by these methods or plants obtained from their vehicles for reproduction (for example, seeds, tubers, cuttings), the flowering regulating protein expression of the present invention changes in comparison with wild type plants, which changes the flowering behavior. The present invention includes transgenic plants thus obtained.

[0042] The present invention provides a novel gene that inhibits flowering of plants. When this gene is introduced into other plants and expressed in the plants, it can inhibits or enhance flowering of the plants.

[0043] various cultivars of grain and vegetable that matures earlir or later than usual can be generated by regulating flowering, which produces such an agriculturally important value as expansion of the suitable cultivation place, increase of yield, and supply of crope with high value added. In particular, though the deterioration of quality by bolting and

flowering is a problem in leaf and stem vegetables such as Chinese cabbage and root vegetables such as Japanese radish, the type of cultivation is limited at present. Therefore, flowering inhibition will bring a great effect such as the expansion of the cultivation season and the suitable cultivation place. Arbitrary flowering regulation will also be considerably useful if it is applied to a cultivar having superior characteristics such as good taste or strong disease resistance. Furthermore, enhancing the floral budding of fruits will increase their productivity or change the flowering time, which enables the production and shipment of fruits out of season. In addition, inhibiting flowering of wood will not only enhance alternation of generations by shortening the period required for flowering but also enhance vegetative growth or suppress allergy induction in humans caused by scatter of pollen, which is economically and socially significant.

[0044] The present invention is illustrated in detail below with reference to Examples, but is not to be construed as being limited thereto. Besides, methods for general gene recombination such as cleavage and ligation of DNAs, transformation of *E. coli,* determination of nucleotide sequences of genes, hybridization were performed, unless otherwise mentioned, based on manuals attached to commercial reagents and apparatus or laboratory books, for example, "Molecular Cloning" (Sambrook et al. (1989), Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press). In addition, cultivation of *Arabidopsis* using agar medium or soil, mating manipulation, preparation of genomic DNAs, genetic analysis are performed, unless otherwise mentioned, in accorcance with laboratory books, for example, "Experimental Protocols for Model Plants" (Shimamoto & Okada (1996), Cell Engineering SUPPLEMENT, Plant Cell Engineering Series 4, Shujunsha).

Example 1

Isolating Arabidopsis flowering regulating gene "MPC1"

[0045] In order to clone a flowering regulation gene from *Arabidopsis*, mutants that flower immediately after cotyledon expansion (super early flowering mutants) was isolated as follows. The M2 (seeds after self-fertilization of individuals obtained by sowing mutagenized seeds) of *Arabidopsis* (ecotype: *Landsberg*) mutagenized with chemical mutagen EMS were prepared and sown on agar medium (1/2 B5 medium (Gamborg et al. (1968), Exp. Cell Res., vol.50: p151-); 1% sucrose, 0.8% agar). The screening was performed by observing the morphology of seedlings germinated. About fifty thousand individuals divided into ten lots were screened to obtain one kind of super early flowering mutant. This mutant was named "mpc1." Since "mpc1" flowers before the plant sufficiently matures, its flower has no fertility and the strain cannot be maintained. Five thousand individuals from the lot in which the mutant had been obtained were cultivated to obtain seeds (M3) of each individual. Strains of heterozygotes that segregate the super early flowering mutant were obtained by sowing these seeds individually and observing their seedling. The "mpcl" mutation was found to be caused by single recessive gene from the facts that the mutation segregates the mutant individuals in the proportion of one fourth in the M3 generation and also segregates the mutant individuals in the proportion of one fourth in the F2 generation obtained by mating with the wild type.

[0046] The strains of heterozygotes were backcrossed onto wild type strain *Landsberg* two times and the next generation obtained was mated with wild type strain *Columbia*. A DNA was extracted from each individual of the F2 generation by the conventional methods and analyzed for the recombinant value between the mutant characteristics and RFLP (Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphism) marker (Liu et al. (1996), Plant J., vo1.10(4): p733-), CAPS (Codominant cleaved Amplified Polymorphism Sequences) marker (Konienczmy et al. (1993), Plant J., vol.4: p403-), and microsatelite marker (Bell et a1. (1994), Genomics, vol,19: p137-) to map the gene causing the mutation on a chromosome. The desired gene was mapped between well-known DNA markers on the chromosome 5, mi2 (Lister & Dean (1995), Weeds World, vol.2(I): p23-, http://nasc.life.nott.ac.uk:8300/) and Ds389-14 (Smith et al. (1996), Plant J., vol. 10(4): p721-).

[0047] In order to isolate DNA fragments covering this chromosome region, CIC-YAC library (Creusot et al. (1995), Plant J., vol.8: p763-), P1-library (Liu et al. (1995), Plant J., vol.7: p351-) and TAC library (Liu et al. (1995), The Molecular Biology Society of Japan 18th Annual Meeting) were screened with the two marker mentioned above and DNA clones were obtained. DNA fragments were prepared from the clones obtained, novel DNA markers were generated, and detailed chromosome mapping of genes and screening of DNA clones were repeated on after another. As a result, the desired gene was found to locate between the markers 16EB53 and Z11-1, which can be obtained from the genomic DNA by PCR amplification. 16EB53 can be obtained by PCR with synthetic oligonucleotide primers "GGATCCGAAC CCGACTCGGT ACC" (SEQ ID NO: 4) and "GCTTATGGAT GTGGACTCTC TAAC" (SEQ ID NO: 5), and Z11-1 can be obtained by PCR with synthetic oligonucleotide primers "AGGTCCTACA ACTACAACAG TT" (SEQ ID NO: 6) and "GAGGAAGCTA GTATTCTCTT TG" (SEQ ID NO: 7).

[0048] The chromosome region between the markers 16EB53 and Z11-1 is indicated with DNA contigs of four kinds of TAC clones (11K22, 22K2, 19A20, and 20I12) shown in Figure 1. These TAC clones are about 70 to 100 kb long. When each of these clones was introduced into the mutant individual through *Agrobacterium tumefaciens*, the introduction of the three clones other than 20I12 reverted to wild-type (methods for gene introduction and cultivation of transformed plants are described in detail in Example 2). When cDNA library of *Arabidopsis* (Newman et al. (1994),

Plant Physiol., vol.106: p1241-) was screened using about 50 kb region common to these three clones as a probe, six kinds of gene cDNAs were obtained. The sites of these genes were mapped on DNA contigs. Moreover, the clones were completely or partially digested with restriction enzymes and subcloned to confirm whether each gene contributed to reversion. As a result of introducing these subclones, one gene having reversion ability was identified. This gene was confirmed to be the gene causing the super early flowering mutation "mpcl," that is, flowering regulating gene "MPC1". Analysis of this genomic region and the nucleotide sequence of the cDNA clones clarified that "MPC1" structural gene has 22 exons divided by 21 introns and that the length is 5580 bp. The protein encoded by the gene has a molecular weight of 69.5 kDa with 611 amino acid residues. It contains a C2H2 type zinc finger (Rosenfeld et al. (1993), J. Biomol. Struct. Dyn., vol.11: p557), which is characteristic of nucleic acid binding proteins, and an acidic amino acid cluster, in transcription activiting domain of a transcription factor at amino acids 306 to 327 and 503 to 520, respectively, of SEQ ID NO: 1.

[0049] Homology search using DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank database detected sequences having partial homology, but each of them was a fragmentary sequence with unknown function. Specifically, they are a partial cDNA sequence of rice (EST C72616) and a genomic primary structure sequence of *Arabidopsis* (Z97342). This homologous sequence of *Arabidopsis* is located on the chromosome different from "MPC1" gene of the present invention and is greatly different from "MPC1" gene in that the region corresponding to that between the fifth and tenth exon of "MPC1" gene is missing. The sequence may be derived from the gene of the present invention by deletion of the above region, and thus be originally a gene related to flowering. These results indicates that genes homologous to that of the present invention with specific function have not been found so far and therefore the gene of the present invention is novel. In addition, the analysis of the nucleotide sequence of this gene of the "mpcl" mutant revealed that guanine base at 5039 of SEQ ID NO: 3 is replaced with adenine and that a termination codon occurs in the coding frame. An incomplete protein lacking amino acids from 541 and the following C-terminal region of "MPC1" protein by the base substitution is thought to be expressed in "mpcl" mutant. Since this protein lacks flowering regulating function partially or completely, it is thought that the plant cannot maintain vegetative growth and causes super early flowering.

Example 2

Inducing flowering by gene introduction

[0050] An antisense gene was constructed using a part of the *Arabidopsis* flowering regulating gene "MPC1" cDNA. The sequence between the BamHI site at nucleotide 1650 and the SphI site at 1984 of cDNA shown in SEQ ID NO: 2 was separated by restriction enzyme digestion. To transcribe the complementary sequence of the transcript of the resulting fragment, binary vector pBI121 (Jefferson et al. (1987), EMBO J., vol.6: p3901-) was cleaved at the XbaI site at the downstream of 35 S promoter, blunted, cleaved with BamHI, and ligated with the fragment obtained above that had been cleaved with SphI, blunted, and cleaved again with BamHI. This construct was used as an antisense gene.

[0051] The antisense gene was introduced into *Arabidopsis* by a gene transfer method using *Agrobacterium tumefaciens*. First, the antisense gene expression vector mentioned above was transferred into *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* by electroporation. The expression vector has the kanamycin resistance gene as the marker. The antisense-gene expression vector DNA was mixed with *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* suspended in 10% glycerol and the mixture had electric pulse added in a 1 mm wide cuvette electrodes with a setting of 25 μF, 600 Ω, and 1.8 kV. The cells were then cultivated on LB agar medium (1% bactotryptone, 0.5% yeast extract, 0.5% sodium chloride, 1.2% bactoagar) supplemented with 25 μ g/ml kanamycin and 50 μ g/ml refampicin at 28°C for two days and colonies of kanamycin resistant *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* were screened. *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* having this antisense gene was cultivated in LB liquid medium (1% bactotryptone, 0.5% yeast extract, 0.5% sodium chloride) supplemented with 50 μg/ml rifampicin and 25 μg/ml kanamycin at 28°C for 16 hours to prepare culture of *Agrobacterium tumefaciens*.

[0052] Seeds of *Arabidopsis* sterilized with 1% sodium hypochlorite were sowed in MS agar medium (Murashige & Skoog (1962), Physiol. Plant, vol.15: p473-) supplemented with 1% sucrose and 0.4% Gellan Gum, and grown at 25°C for 14 days. A hypocotyl of grown *Arabidopsis was* cut out and put on CIM medium (B5 agar medium (Gamborg et al. (1968), Exp. Cell Res., vol.50: pl51-) supplemented with 0.5 mg/l 2,4D, 0.05 mg/l kinetin, 2% glucose, and 0.4% Gellan Gum), and cultivated at 25°C for 6 days in the dark.

[0053] This hypocotyl was mixed with the above culture of *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* having the antisense gene, put on CIM medium again and cultivated at 25°C for two days to infect the hypocotyl with the bacteria. The hypocotyl was sterilized by washing in B5 liquid medium comprising 150 mg/l Claforan (cefotaxime sodium) and 2% glucose for five hours with shaking. The resulting hypocotyl was subcultured in SIM medium (B5 agar medium containing 2 mg/l gelatin, 0.2 mg/l IBA, 150 mg/l Claforan, 50 μg/ml kanamycin, 2% glucose, and 0.4% Gellan Gum) every week to differentiate and screen the transformant. 35 S promoter, which promotes to express the antisense gene, is known as a constitutive expression promoter. Pistils were differentiated directly from the hypocotyl in fourth week of subcultivation.

Example 3

Isolating rice flowering regulating gene "Os-MPC1"

[0054] Homology search of DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank database with the sequence of *Arabidopsis* flowering regulating gene "MPC1" as the probe detected a partial cDNA sequence of rice (EST C72616) that is partially homologous to MPC1. The whole cDNA sequence of this gene, whose function was unknown, was isolated as follows. First, cDNA library derived from rice immature seeds was screened using the partial cDNA sequence on the databases as the hybridization probe and one kind of cDNA clone was obtained. The cDNA of the clone was found to be 2248 bp long by nucleotide sequence determination and the protein encoded by this cDNA has a molecular weight of 68.6 kDa with 604 amino acid residues. The nucleotide sequence of the cDNA and the amino acid sequence of the protein encoded by the cDNA are shown in SEQ ID NO: 9 and 8, respectively. The sequence identity between the amino acid sequence of this protein and that of *Arabidopsis* "MPC1" protein is 61%, which is significant homology. Therefore, this gene was thought to be the gene corresponding to *Arabidopsis* "MPC1" in rice and was named "Os-MPC1." "Os-MPC1" protein was found to have a zinc finger motif and an acidic amino acid cluster as "MPC1" at amino acids 310 to 331 and 488 to 505, respectively, of SEQ ID NO: 8.

Example 4

Chromosome mapping of rice "Os-MPC1" gene

[0055] Chromosomal DNA fragments derived from a part of 3' region of "Os-MPC1" gene were amplified from rice strains "Asominori" and "IR24" by PCR. Synthetic oligonucleotide primers "GACGAGAAAC TTATTATGCA TATG" (SEQ ID NO: 10) and "GGTCTTGATA CTGCTCTACA GTTATG" (SEQ ID NO: 11) were used for amplification. About 1.3 kb amplified gene fragments thus obtained showed restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP): cleavage patterns were different between strains of, "Asominori" and "IR24" when digested with restriction enzyme SspI. The locus of "Os-MPC1" gene on a chromosome can be determined by correlating this RFLP with the RFLP map already known for rice. The locus of "Os-MPC1" was determined by calculating recombination value between "Os-MPC1" gene fragments and RFLP markers whose sites have been already determined using the chromosomal DNA of Recombinant Inbred (RI) strains generated from plants obtained by mating between rice "Asominori" and "IR24" (Tsunematsu et al. (1993), Rice Genetics Newsletter, vol.10: p89-). The result of the analysis revealed that "Os-MPC1" gene was located near the well-known C152 marker at the terminus of rice chromosome 9. Any flowering regulating genes have never been found at the terminus of the chromosome 9 of rice. From this fact, "Os-MPC1" gene is a novel and fundamental flowering regulating gene, which was difficult to be detected by conventional techniques.

Example 5

Complementing *Arabidopsis* super early flowering mutation by rice "Os-MPC1" gene

[0056] Flowering regulating function of rice "Os-MPC1" gene isolated was tested. "Os-MPC1" cDNA was first cleaved at the NotI site at the 3'-terminal connection with the vector, blunted, and then cleaved at the NheI site in the 5' noncoding region to obtain only the cDNA sequence without the vector sequence. Separately, binary vector pBI121 (Jefferson et al. (1987), EMBO J., vol.6: p3901-) was cleaved at the SmaI site at the downstream of 35 S promoter and ligated with the blunted 3'-end of the above-mentioned cDNA fragment. The ligation product was then cleaved at the XbaI site at the upstream of the SmaI site in the vector, ligated at this site with the NheI site of the cDNA fragment to obtain the expression vector of "Os-MPC1" gene. The "Os-MPC1" gene was introduced into the mutant by introducing the above vector into *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* and infecting the slice of root of the *Arabidopsis* super early flowering mutant with the bacteria (methods for gene introduction and cultivation of plants into which the mutation was introduced are described in detail in Example 2). When a root of the super early flowering mutant without the "Os-MPC1" gene was cultivated to allow it to differentiate to an individual, only the direct floral differentiation due to the influence of the mutation was observed. In contrast, it was confirmed when "Os-MPC1" gene was introduced into the mutant that the mutation was complemented and stems and leaves were differentiated and grew.

[0057] These results indicate that not only "Os-MPC1" gene is functionally proved to be a flowering regulating gene of rice but also "flowering regulating gene" of the present invention functions similarly in wide-ranging species of plants.

Example 6

Isolating flowering regulating genes from various kinds of plants

[0058] The amino acid sequences encoded by *Arabidopsis* "MPC1" gene and rice "Os-MPC1" gene were compared with each other and two regions were selected from similar amino acid sequences commonly found in both flowering regulating proteins. Specifically, one region is "Lys Arg Gln Phe Phe His Ser" (SEQ ID NO: 12) at amino acids 484 to 490 of SEQ ID NO: 1 and the other is "Trp Ala Cys Glu Ala Phe" (SEQ ID NO: 13) at amino acids 558 to 563 of SEQ ID NO: 1. Next, four kinds of synthetic oligonucleotide primers KR1 "AAGCGGCAAT TTTAYCAYTC" (SEQ ID NO: 14), KR2 "AAGCGGCAGT TCTAYCAYTC" (SEQ ID NO: 15), KR3 "AAGCGGCAGT TCTAYCAYAG" (SEQ ID NO: 16), and KR4 "AAGCGGCAAT TTTAYCAYAG" (SEQ ID NO: 17) were prepared based on the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 12, and two kinds of synthetic oligonucleotide primers WA1 "AATACCTCAC ANGCCCA" (SEQ ID NO: 18) and WA2 "AATACTTCGC ANGCCCA" (SEQ ID NO: 19) were prepared based on the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 13.

[0059] PCR was performed using eight kinds of combinations of the primers KR1, KR2, KR3, and KR4 with the primers WA1 and WA2 and chromosomal DNA of rice (ecotype: Nipponbare) and sugar beet (ecotype: Sugarman Gold) as templates. The nucleotide sequence of each amplified fragments was determined and compared to the known flowering regulating genes.

[0060] As a result, the 1216 bp fragment of sugar beet amplified by PCR using the primers KR1 and WA2 was proved to be a part of sugar beet flowering regulating gene. The nucleotide sequence of this sugar beet gene fragment is shown in SEQ ID NO: 20. In the gene fragment, nucleotide sequence encoding amino acids are divided by three introns and their locations are the same as that of *Arabidopsis* "MPC1" gene.

[0061] The fragment amplified for rice by PCR using the primers KR2 and WA2 was proved to be a part of rice flowering regulating gene "Os-MPC1."

[0062] Using these amplified gene fragments, the full-length of the gene can be readily cloned by screening library clones, PCR technique, or other methods.

[0063] It is possible to obtain flowering regulating genes from not only rice and sugar beet but also various species of plants using the method mentioned above.

Annex to the description

[0064]

SEQUENCE LISTING

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Arg Ser Leu Leu Gln Lys Arg Gln Phe Phe His Ser His Arg Ala Gln
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ccc atg gct cta gaa caa gta ctt tcg gac cgg gat agt gaa gat gaa   1839
Pro Met Ala Leu Glu Gln Val Leu Ser Asp Arg Asp Ser Glu Asp Glu
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Val Asp Asp Asp Val Ala Asp Phe Glu Asp Arg Arg Met Leu Asp Asp
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Phe Val Asp Val Thr Lys Asp Glu Lys Gln Met Met His Met Trp Asn
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Ser Phe Val Arg Lys Gln Arg Val Leu Ala Asp Gly His Ile Pro Trp
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Ala Cys Glu Ala Phe Ser Arg Leu His Gly Pro Ile Met Val Arg Thr
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ccg cac ttg att tgg tgc tgg aga gtg ttt atg gtg aaa ctg tgg aac   2079
Pro His Leu Ile Trp Cys Trp Arg Val Phe Met Val Lys Leu Trp Asn
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Glu Gln Leu Gln Ile
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Gln Arg Arg Ala Ile Arg Asn
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His Lys Arg Arg
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105 110 115 120

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Cys Lys Pro Val Glu Leu Tyr Asn Ile Ile Gln Arg Arg Ser Ile Lys
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Asn Pro Ala Phe Leu Gln Arg Cys Leu Leu Tyr Lys Ile His Ala Arg
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Phe Leu Glu Pro Lys Phe Leu Glu Asp Asp Ser Cys Leu Thr Phe Cys
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Val Tyr Ser Tyr Asn Asp Val Pro Pro Ser Ser Leu Thr His Ile Ile
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agtatt 1216

Claims

1. A DNA encoding a protein having flowering regulating activity, wherein said DNA selected from the group consisting of:

   i) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1;
   ii) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence substantially identical to that of SEQ ID NO: 1;
   iii) a DNA hybridizing a DNA encoding the protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:1;
   iv) a DNA encoding a protein comprising amino acid sequences showing 50% or more and 60% or more homology with amino acids 278 to 348 and 465 to 607, respectively, of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1;
   v) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8.
   vi) a DNA encoding a protein comprising the amino acid sequence substantially identical to that of SEQ ID NO: 8.
   vii) a DNA hybridizing a DNA encoding the protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8; and
   viii) a DNA encoding a protein comprising amino acid sequences showing 50% or more and 60% or more homology with amino acids 282 to 352 and 450 to 592, respectively, of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8.

2. The DNA of claim 1, wherein said DNA of i) comprises the coding region of the nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 2.

3. The DNA of claim 1, wherein said DNA of v) comprises the coding region of the nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 9.

4. The DNA of any one of claims 1 to 3, encoding a protein having a zinc finger structure.

5. A protein having flowering regulating activity, encoded by the DNA of any one of claims 1 to 4.

6. The protein of claim 5, comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 1 or 8.

7. A recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule comprising an expression cassette comprising the DNA of any one of claims 1 to 4.

8. A recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule comprising an expression cassette comprising the following constituent elements of i) to iii),

   i) a promoter that can transcribe in plant cells,
   ii) the DNA of any one of claims 1 to 4 or a part of it fused to said promoter in sense or antisense direction, and selectively, and
   iii) a signal involved in transcription termination of RNA molecules and polyadenylation, wherein the signal functions in plants.

9. A transformant into which the recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule of claim 7 is introduced.

10. A transgenic plant cell into which the recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule of claim 8 is introduced.

11. A method for producing a protein of claim 5 or 6, wherein the method comprises (a) cultivating a transformant of claim 9 and (b) recovering a recombinant protein from said transformant or the culture supernatant of it.

12. A transgenic plant comprising transgenic plant cells of claim 10.

13. A method for producing a transgenic plant of claim 12, wherein said method comprises

(a) introducing the recombinant double-stranded DNA molecule of claim 8 into plant cells and
(b) regenerating said plant cells.

14. A DNA encoding an antisense RNA complementary to a transcription product of a DNA of any one of claims 1 to 4.

15. A method for regulating the flowering time of a plant, wherein said method comprises introducing the whole or a part of a DNA of any one of claims 1 to 4 or the whole or a part of a DNA of claim 14 into a plant and expressing it, thereby changing the activity of a flowering regulating protein.

16. An antibody that binds to a protein of claim 5 or 6.

Fig. 1